

Difficult Grief and Multiple Losses

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Understanding your Difficult Grief

Grief is never an easy journey. While your strengths, coping mechanisms and network of family, friends and acquaintances are often enough to sustain you through your grief, there may be times when you feel unable to cope or are immobilized by grief for what seems an unacceptable length of time. You may feel overwhelmed by the amount of grief you experience in response to one or more deaths. This is what is meant by difficult grief. Difficulties can occur in any phase of grief. Your difficulty can come up around the time of the death. It may arise as you work through the thoughts and feelings that you have about the death and adjust to life without the person who died. Or, it can occur later in your grief as you face building a future without the person. There are a number of situations that contribute to difficult grief.

- **The nature of the death itself**

The untimely and unexpected nature of a sudden death will bring many challenges to those who grieve. Aspects of a death that are violent or horrifying (as in suicide or murder) are difficult to confront and work through. For example, your brother was murdered and you worry about the pain he may have suffered.

- **The pressures and demands in your own life**

At the time of the death, the number of major changes or transitions in your life will influence the course of your grief journey. You may have heavy responsibilities and stresses that interfere with your ability to grieve. For example, you have started a new job recently and struggle to control your feelings as you do not want your grief to affect your attendance or performance at work.

- **Having a history of losses, trauma or abuse**

Your present grief can trigger unresolved feelings and thoughts about your past experiences. For example, if you were physically abused as a child, the pain of your grief now can bring up old feelings and memories of pain from your childhood. Most often your responses and reactions are reasonable, given what has taken place in your life. When you understand what is happening to you, why, and what you can do about it, your difficult situation begins to be more manageable.

When a Death Occurs: Walking the Edges

In the first phase of grief, when a death has occurred, you are dealing with shock and trying to accept that the death has occurred. When you have difficulties in this phase, you may not be grieving at all. Because you are not yet feeling and expressing your grief, other people may comment on how well you are doing. However, it is important to find ways to acknowledge and express your grief.

Difficulties you may notice:

- You cannot accept the reality of the death.
- You experience ongoing numbness or you continue to feel shock, disbelief and panic.
- You are unable to take care of the business and practical tasks that are required following a death.

There are reasons why you may experience difficulty in this phase. You need to protect yourself from overwhelming and unpleasant information. You may try to create a sense of control amidst the chaos caused by the death. You need more support for your grieving than is available to you. You may have to focus on important immediate responsibilities.

Things to consider:

1. Opening to your grief

You will need safety, support, and permission to express your thoughts and feelings. When your grief begins to surface, you may feel out of step with the grief of other people in your family and social circle. Consequently, you might experience little understanding or support.

What Helps:

- Identify people with whom you can be honest and vulnerable.
- Allow your feelings to come when you feel safe, either alone or with a companion.
- Talk or write about the death and the person who died as often as you want to. Use a journal or tape recorder.
- Talk things through with a counsellor or spiritual mentor.

2. Accepting the reality of the death

Information about the death and what happened may help you to accept that the death has occurred. Reviewing the coroner's report, settling the estate, and sorting out the belongings of the person who died will help to bring the reality of the death to your awareness.

What Helps:

- Get detailed information about the death from other family members, the doctor, or the coroner, etc.
- Memorialize the person who died. You might design or make an urn or gravestone, plant a tree, start a memorial or scholarship fund, create a memory book or album, etc.
- Attend to responsibilities created by or associated with the death. Settle the estate, acknowledge support and condolences, donate medical equipment, or return to normal routines. You may need practical help with these tasks.

As you begin to experience your grief you can expect that:

- Your grief is more apparent, requiring energy and attention.
- You experience good days and bad days, or waves of grief.
- Your feelings are many and varied.
- You constantly review memories and details of your relationship with the person.

Adjusting to Loss: Entering the Depths

In the second phase of grief, you are dealing with what this loss means to you and the emotional pain of grieving. Difficulties here arise through powerful grief reactions that persist in what becomes a repeating pattern. For example, you feel deeply angry frequently over a long time.

Difficulties you may notice:

- Your grief is so intense that you are distracted by it and cannot focus on anything else.
- Your friends and family are uncomfortable or concerned with the intensity of your grief and unable to give you the support you need.
- You are haunted by thoughts and images of the death as your mind tries to understand what happened.
- Your emotions consume your energy and feelings persist without relief or change. You feel overwhelmed and exhausted by these repeating patterns. There are many reasons why you may experience difficulty in this phase. The nature of the death, as mentioned earlier, can be challenging to accept. If there are many changes and stressful events in your life, you may be unable to adapt to the demands of your altered situation. You feel misunderstood or criticized by other people who think you are overreacting. This absence of support becomes another loss to grieve. If you are dealing with the justice system, each new contact may re-open the wound of your loss as you relive the details of the death. You may feel angry or disillusioned that the justice system is not responsive or accountable to you as a victim.

Things to consider:

1. Resolving the pattern

Looking at the patterns of your reactions can help you know when they occur, what triggers them and what helps to settle them.

What Helps:

- Seek counselling help to learn different strategies, such as reframing and releasing that give you a new perspective on your patterns.
- Check out the reality of your disturbing thoughts with an objective person.
- If you are experiencing panic attacks, discuss options and resources with your doctor, counsellor or spiritual mentor

2. Managing the intensity or amount of grief

Understanding that your responses are part of the normal continuum of grief can relieve worries about being 'crazy'. Thought control and pacing your grief are strategies that you can learn from a counsellor and practice yourself. Setting priorities will help you to conserve your energy and lessen your stress.

What Helps:

- Find safe ways to discharge excess energy and emotion, through active and creative outlets. Physical activities such as hitting a ball, running, chopping wood and gardening can be a helpful release. Creative activities such as playing music, painting, and woodworking, keeping a journal, or working on a memorial album can be beneficial outlets.
- Share with others who can understand by joining a support group or participating in chat rooms and message boards on grief websites.
- Practice prayer, meditation or visualization regularly.
- Join an organization whose work is related to loss or find ways to make restitution.

As you begin to express your grief you can expect that:

- You are able to face the difficult issues and to cope with your patterns of grieving.
- Your difficult thoughts and emotions ease and you can let go of some.
- The intense times come less frequently and don't last as long.
- Your energy begins to return and life feels worth living again.

As Life Goes On: Mending the Heart

In the third phase of grief, re-establishing connections with the world around you becomes important. You need to find meaningful, yet realistic, ways to keep the person who died in your life. When you have difficulties in this phase, you feel tied to your grief and unable to move forward in your own life.

Difficulties you may notice:

- You cannot see a future for yourself.
- You stay focussed on the loss rather than yourself and feel guilty that your life goes on.
- You are aware of unfinished business with the person who died.
- You feel depressed and isolated because family and friends have become impatient with you or avoid talking to you about the person who died.

There are many reasons why you may experience difficulty in this phase. You lack a sense of closure with the person who died or you fear the future without that person. If your health is not good or your social network is limited, it may be difficult to find a new routine for your life.

Things to consider:

1. Facing the future

There may be things unfinished that you still worry about. A trusted friend or advisor can help you examine your fears of the future. Through focussing on the present, you begin to identify your resources, supports and personal options.

What Helps:

- Make a list of things that feel unfinished. Complete any outstanding tasks related to the death. Attend to things one by one.
- Find ways to create closure for yourself through memorial activities or projects, such as writing a letter to the person who died, etc.
- Try an 'empty chair conversation' in which you imagine talking to the person who died and say all the things that you need or want to say. You can imagine his or her responses from all that you know about that person.
- Identify and contact supportive people and resources in your community.
- Set small realistic goals for yourself in moving towards the future.

2. Attending to Yourself

You may feel that you get positive attention as a grieving person and fear that support will disappear if you 'get on with your life.' Guilt feelings may prevent you from participating in enjoyable activities. Information about the normal grief process helps you understand what is reasonable to expect of yourself now.

What Helps:

- Give yourself permission to focus on your own needs and to enjoy yourself.
- Reach out to others; reconnect with an old friend, start a new activity, or join an organization.
- Celebrate your good memories of the person who died.

As you begin to move forward in your grief you can expect that:

- Your loss becomes part of your past, integrated as part of who you are now.
- Your feelings of grief are intermittent and manageable.
- You continue to remember and miss the person who died.
- You have energy and interest for life.

Understanding Grief from Multiple Losses

'Multiple losses' refers to the experience of grieving for many people and/or things at the same time in response to one or more deaths. As a result of multiple losses, your usual support system is likely to be seriously depleted. People around you find it hard to comprehend the extent of your grief or to tolerate the intensity of your feelings. It takes considerable time and energy to grieve multiple losses. The lack of connection with others may increase your sense of isolation and hopelessness.

Due to the loss of your familiar self and familiar world, you find yourself thinking or saying something like, "I don't know who I am anymore." You may be spending more time thinking about yourself than about your grief or those who died. You may feel numb or judgmental about your own lack of feeling. You might indulge in some harmful behaviour, such as recklessness, or drug or alcohol abuse.

When you are in touch with your grief, your reactions seem chaotic, as one thought or emotion connects one grief with another. You may experience a 'snow ball' effect of feeling out of control.

Multiple losses result from:

- **A number of deaths close together**

Natural or criminal disasters, an accident claiming a number of lives, or an epidemic are all dramatic examples of multiple losses. However, you may experience multiple losses, for example, if your parents both died and your spouse also lost a parent within a few years.

- **A host of other losses as the result of one death**

Where a single relationship has held a great deal of meaning or been particularly complex, you may experience its end as catastrophic. For example, your spouse of 50+ years died after a lengthy illness. You have no children. You find that your social support network is seriously depleted and that your personal resources are at a low ebb.

Difficulties you may notice:

- You are overwhelmed by so much loss and grief.
- You are afraid that you can't cope with the intensity of your own emotions.
- You feel disconnected from your former life and personal identity.
- You are focused on yourself to the exclusion of others.

Things to consider:

1. Understanding the impact

You might begin by identifying your losses and their significance to you. In looking at the ways your life has changed, you understand why you are feeling such depth of grief, despair and isolation.

What Helps:

- Give yourself permission to be as affected as you are by the circumstances of your life.
- Allow time for grief; take time for healing activities in your daily routine.
- Identify the effects of your losses and deal with one thing at a time.
- Begin to rebuild meaningful connections in your life. Identify new and remaining support people.
- Ask for help from friends, family and professionals.

2. Renewing your sense of self

It is essential to focus on yourself, first, before you can move forward in your grief process. You need to feel secure enough about yourself and your support network to do your grieving.

What Helps:

- Take care of yourself. Rebuild your strength by attending to your physical, emotional and social needs.
- Give yourself permission to spend time in leisure activities and things that you would usually enjoy.
- Practice prayer or meditation regularly.
- Nurture the positive in yourself and your view of life.
- Accept offers of support and have suggestions ready for the question "What can I do?" such as, mow my lawn, or invite me to dinner once a month.
- As you are able, reach out to the people with whom you feel comfortable.

3. Identifying themes in your grief

The connections between losses, the similarities in fact, thought or feelings will be the themes of your grief process. Awareness of these themes can help to provide a sense of order in the chaos and give you more manageable pieces to work with.

What Helps:

- Find ways to pace your grief, taking it in limited doses.
- Allow yourself times to express your grief balanced with times when you manage or control your thoughts and emotions.
- Create rituals for closure for yourself as a way to acknowledge your losses. Remembering those who have died will help you to integrate the past with the present.

4. Getting support for your grief

This is a time when you need and deserve all the help you can get. If you are grieving multiple losses, you need sufficient support and safety to begin expressing the complexity and intensity of your grief. A knowledgeable, trustworthy person, such as a spiritual mentor or a counsellor, can provide an environment and relationship within which your grief may be explored. A bereavement support group may provide support for the challenges that you face and a place for sharing.

What Helps:

- Learn coping strategies that help with your grief. You might try something new or different.
- Spend grief time alone and with companions.
- Connect with others through a bereavement group, or chat lines and bulletin boards on the Internet.
- Use active and creative outlets to express your grief.

In Conclusion

As you move through your grief, you may encounter particular difficulty only once over a certain issue or you may find that each step of the way is painful and challenging. Grief is unique for each person. Be sure that you get the help and support that you need to deal with what this loss means for you.

Resources

Book Resources

Beyond Grief. Carol Staudacher

This book has something for everyone who is grieving or wants to know about grief. There are general chapters that address the emotional, physical, social, thought and spiritual struggles that bereaved people commonly experience. There are chapters that address particular losses.

Living When a Loved One has Died. Earl Grollman

This book is very simply written and yet touches on many aspects of grieving. It is affirming and encouraging.

Men Don't Cry – Women Do: Beyond Gender Differences in Grief. Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka

Although this book is written for those supporting the bereaved, it has good information about differing styles of grieving. Intuitive (emotional, expressive) and Instrumental (rational, active) ways of coping with grief are described.

A Path through Loss. Nancy Reeves

This workbook is a tool for self-directed grief work, and contains exercises and suggestions for writing as a path for healing.

No time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice after a Tragic Death. Janice Harris Lord

This book focuses on sudden and traumatic death, and the unique experiences of bereaved people. Various relationships and losses are explored, and information is provided about coping with strong feelings and the suddenness of death.



We have chosen the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the journey through grief. A labyrinth is not a maze as there are no dead ends and no wrong turnings. There is only one way – forward. So it is with grief. The only way through is forward, with many turns and going back and forth over what seems like the same territory. We journey to the centre of our grief, to the centre of ourselves, and then slowly return to re-enter the world.

Each person's experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. As you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.